

nwea State Solutions

It's time to rethink state assessment

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State accountability assessments are considered high stakes—for districts, individual schools, teachers, and students. There have been school closures, protests, opt-out movements, and frustration on all sides. Three years ago, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provided states with more freedom and opportunity to develop innovative assessment solutions. Yet accountability assessment remains largely unchanged.

This isn't surprising. While ESSA affords more flexibility, developing a new approach is complex, time-consuming, and potentially risky. However, persistent achievement gaps and uneven graduation rates show that the time is right for a significant change.

The opportunity

State departments of education need valuable proficiency information to assess how well schools are serving students and identify those most in need of improvement and support. District leaders and teachers need that same information to move students toward standards-based learning targets. But summative test results arrive far too late to be useful in the classroom and don't reveal student learning needs above or below grade level. As a result, districts administer a variety of additional assessments during the year to get the insights they need to impact student learning.

In addition, while summative tests allow states to measure academic growth as a year-over-year change in summative proficiency scores, they don't reveal how much learning occurred from fall to spring. This within-year growth information is critical to understanding how well schools are serving students. When considered alongside proficiency data, it reveals which schools need the most support and which schools are beating the odds, so promising practices can be shared.

A new approach: Adaptive, through-year assessment from NWEA

Traditional summative tests evaluate schools and the systems they belong to, and interim assessments assess each student's learning. Now, there is a solution that provides valuable information about both systems and students.

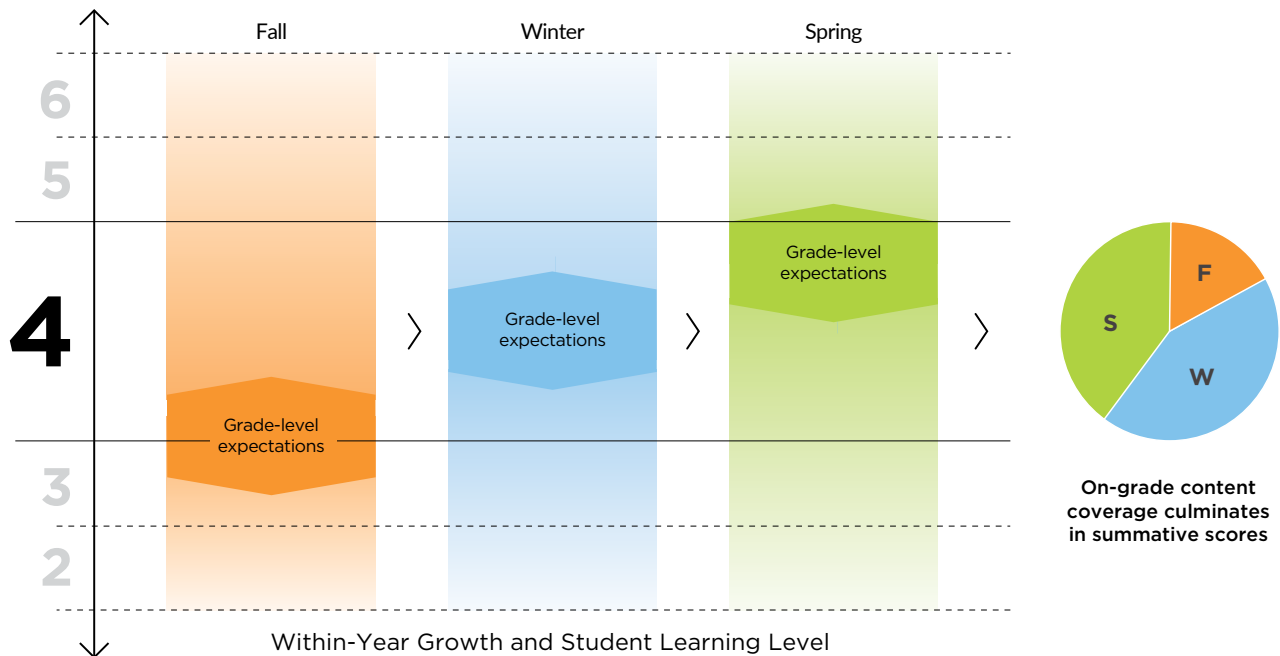
Adaptive, through-year assessment from NWEA® enables states to get the summative information they need while maximizing test efficiency, providing districts with instructionally-useful data, and gaining a more accurate view of school and student performance.

With this unified approach, adaptive interim assessments measure each student's command of grade-level standards and academic growth in addition to producing summative proficiency scores. The results equip state and district leaders with a more complete view of school performance for school improvement efforts and empower teachers with insights they need to accelerate student learning.

How it works

Through-year assessment measures performance in relation to grade-level learning expectations and adapts above or below grade level to reveal each student’s learning level and needs. When the assessment adapts outside of grade level, it does so within the summative blueprint, remaining aligned to the state-specific standards for the grade levels above or below.

Here’s how it works for a fourth-grader:



This graphic represents just one student’s experience. Each assessment adapts to individual student performance to reflect the level of sophistication the student is ready for, while ensuring test blueprint coverage by end of year, so the “pieces of the pie” will look different for each student.

- **In the fall**, the assessment uses the student’s previous (spring) score (if available) and early fourth grade learning expectations to inform the questions presented, and adapts up or down in response to the student’s performance.
- **In the winter**, it picks up from the student’s fall results, measures against unmet fourth grade learning expectations, and adapts outside of grade level as necessary.
- **In the spring**, the assessment picks up from the student’s winter results, measures against any remaining fourth grade learning expectations, and adapts as needed.

States also have the option of administering performance tasks with each assessment, though NWEA recommends restricting performance tasks to the spring term for increased efficiency.

The full summative blueprint is covered over the course of the year. Students show competency when they are ready, and critical retention checks can be built into each administration. Following the spring assessment, summative scores for accountability are generated, based on the full summative blueprint for each content area—**effectively eliminating the need for the annual summative test.**

A foundation that drives student learning

Through-year assessment is made possible with an innovative test engine that customizes the interim assessment to reflect a state's summative blueprint. It is also flexible enough to allow for adaptivity outside of grade level in response to student performance. This is similar to, but different from, MAP® Growth™, another assessment offered by NWEA that adapts unrestrained across grade levels and doesn't yield summative proficiency data.

WHAT ABOUT GROWTH NORMS?

Through-year assessment employs a vertical scale and preserves access to industry-leading national growth norms from NWEA.

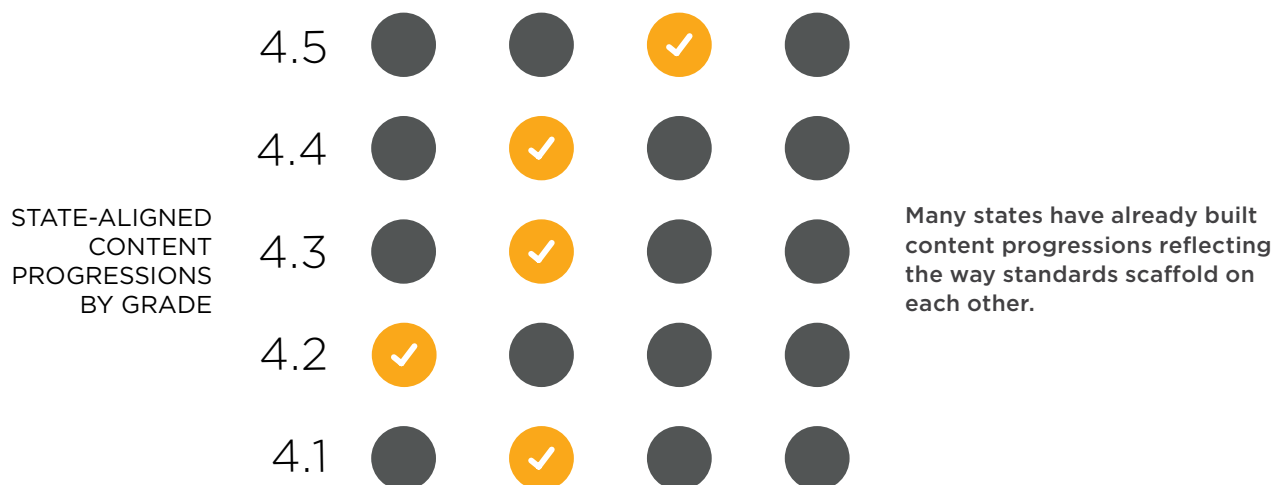
The through-year test engine works by allowing for numerous content and statistical constraints. For example, it can:

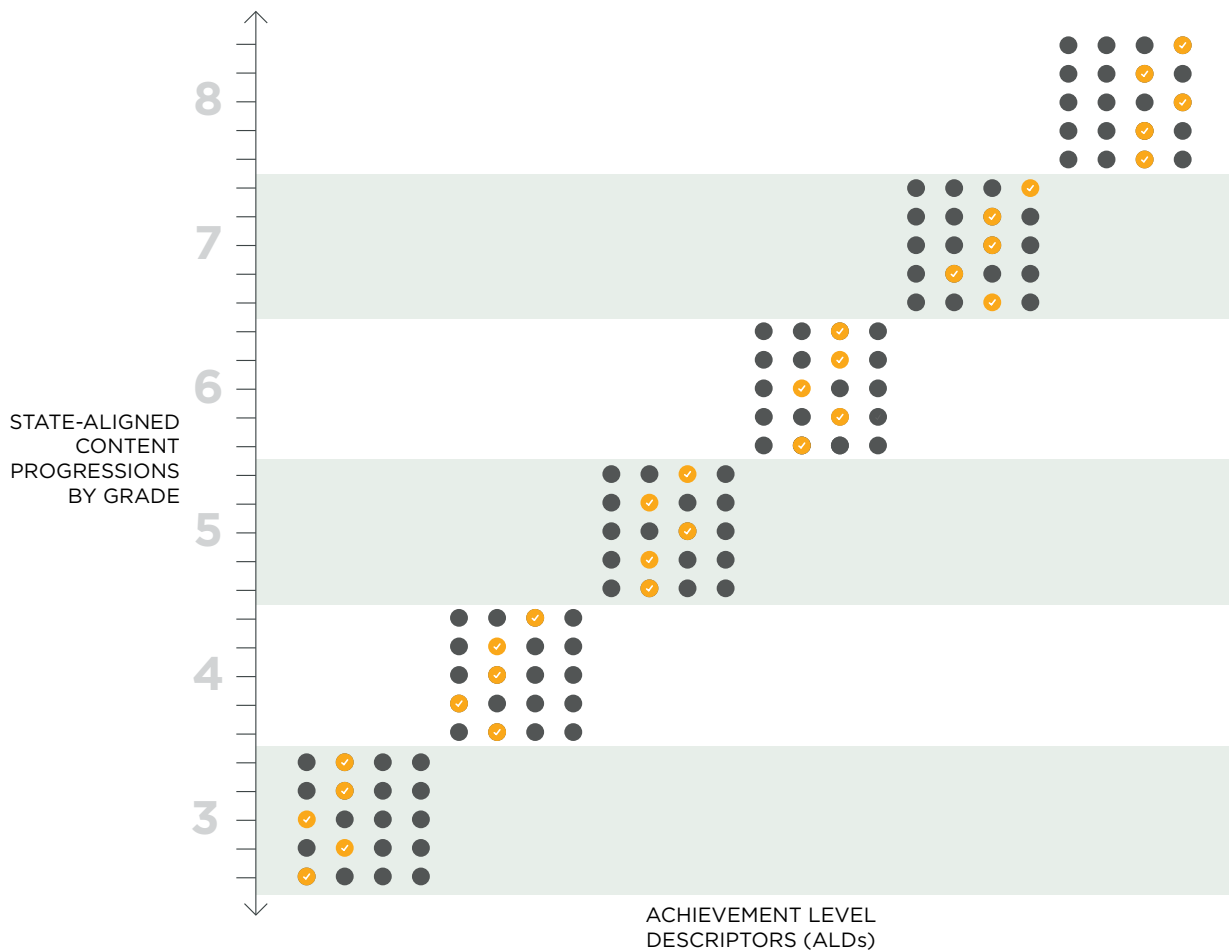
- constrain by item type or Depth of Knowledge (DOK)
- include anchor items presented to every student in a grade level
- ensure a specified number of items with different characteristics are included, like a certain number of informational or literary passages

State-aligned content progressions and achievement level descriptors

Test blueprints and item pools for through-year assessment are based on state-aligned **content progressions**—the sequence in which students typically develop or are expected to develop knowledge and skills—and range **achievement level descriptors (ALDs)**, which articulate how understanding becomes more sophisticated as learning within each content progression deepens. Content progressions and ALDs are established by state and district stakeholders and informed by rigorous state standards.

Assessment items based on content progressions and ALDs are built to show where students are in their understanding, not just if they answered a question correctly or incorrectly. As a result, they provide nuanced information about each student's stage of reasoning within the standards. This helps teachers see how they can engage students at beginning skill levels in grade-level content and move proficient students from base-level mastery to advanced levels of understanding—raising the bar for all.





Teachers can use the information range ALDs provide about student performance, relative to their place in the content progression, to drive student growth over time and help students reach and exceed proficiency levels.

It's important to note that content progressions do not replace the art and science of teaching. As part of standards scaffolding, they help teachers leverage the typical or expected sequence of learning to maximize it. Nor do content progressions imply age-based or calendar-based curriculum designs or instructional planning. With the through-year approach, if students haven't learned or been taught a concept at the time it is assessed, they have another chance to demonstrate mastery on the next assessment. Students can progress toward mastery at their own pace; there are multiple pathways to proficiency.

Better insights for informed decisions

With adaptive, through-year assessment from NWEA, states get accurate summative results with increased efficiency, plus data showing how much students are learning during the school year. District administrators and teachers get timely information about grade-level performance and individual student learning level and growth (whether within, above, or below grade level).

These two types of data, traditionally produced by two different assessments (summative and interim), are generated by a single assessment solution that evaluates students and systems simultaneously, maximizing test efficiency and classroom time.

More accurate school performance data for states

Every state includes growth as a measure in its ESSA plan. But most measures of growth are based on year-to-year changes in proficiency scores. With adaptive, through-year assessment, states can take a deeper look at how much learning is happening at schools. It measures how much each student grows academically during the year, even if a student hasn't yet reached proficiency.

This is particularly important for equity. Schools in high poverty areas often perform lower on achievement because of persistent opportunity gaps their students and families face. By looking at how much learning is taking place for every student during the year, states can ensure their school rating systems are measuring school performance, not poverty. They can evaluate the efficacy of improvement strategies at schools by understanding where progress in growth is the greatest. They can also identify schools that need help the most (low-achieving, low-growth schools) and help those schools learn from peer schools that are growing students more (low-achieving, high-growth schools). This is crucial, because growth paves the pathway to proficiency.

Through-year assessment from NWEA provides:

- A clearer view of school performance for leaders
- More useful and timely data for teachers
- Fewer tests and more learning for students

In addition, because this approach to assessing growth measures fall-to-spring academic growth versus changes in spring-to-spring summative scores, it avoids attributing summer learning loss to the school. This can reduce potential bias against schools with primarily underserved populations who are more likely to experience summer learning loss.



Considering Fall-to-Spring Growth and Summative Proficiency in School Performance

Timely information for district and classroom decisions

Through-year assessment reports will feature both quantitative and qualitative information designed to promote teacher inquiry. Reports will include recommendations regarding student progress relative to established content progressions based on state-specific standards, allowing teachers to make meaningful instructional adjustments and connections. Reports will also feature recommended classroom-based performance tasks to help students develop relevant skills and apply their knowledge. These tasks are for formative purposes; results will not factor into summative proficiency scores.

This individualized guidance enables teachers to meet students where they are and propel them forward along the learning pathway—holding all students to high standards and helping them reach and exceed proficiency levels. It also provides students and parents with clear information on next steps, equipping them to take ownership over learning.

Professional learning to empower informed decision-making

Adaptive, through-year assessment is a powerful new strategy when state leaders, district administrators, and teachers use results to inform next steps. Professional learning is a key part of this new paradigm—with a focus on breaking traditional assumptions about the purposes and timing of assessments. It also supports participants in understanding how to use the rich data from multiple measures to inform decisions.

Driving effectiveness in the classroom is core to the through-year assessment approach. Teachers get assessment data that is communicated in practical, actionable language and is tied directly to standards, showing each student's position along the content progression and his or her achievement level within each skill area. Onsite and online professional learning sessions help teachers learn how to use this nuanced information to differentiate instruction and move students effectively toward and beyond proficiency. However, teachers also need time to discuss the data, triangulate it with other sources of knowledge, and collaborate with each other on connected teaching and learning strategies. A focus on the development of strong professional learning communities, as well as the honing of formative instructional practice, supports teachers in using assessment insights to calibrate their professional judgment and personalize learning.

The goal is big: support teachers in engaging all students in challenging content to facilitate equitable access to lifelong learning and success.

It's time to move beyond measuring learning to fostering it

Year after year, student performance data shows that current models of accountability assessment are not yielding desired outcomes. Educational and economic disparities remain.

For too long, state summative tests have been disconnected from student learning. Schools growing students successfully have been overlooked or misidentified as struggling. Teachers have not received timely, grade-level performance data. And students have been given too many disparate tests.

The time is now to eliminate the barrier between assessments that measure school performance and those that drive student learning. It's time to challenge the status quo, so we can do better by students. It's time to:

- build a unified, innovative approach to assessment
- gain a more accurate view of high- and low-performing schools
- decrease the time spent on testing
- provide data that accelerates learning

To better foster student learning, rethink state assessment in partnership with NWEA. Together, we can create equity in opportunity and outcomes for all students.

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About the author:

Abby Javurek is the Vice President of Educational Solutions at NWEA. A national advocate for meaningful and equitable assessment, Javurek was previously the director of the Division of Accountability Systems for the South Dakota Department of Education (DOE). She also served on the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium Executive Committee from 2015-18, and was the chair of the committee in 2017-18. Her goal is to help states solve their biggest educational challenges and to create assessments that are meaningful to the classroom and ensure equity for all students.

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